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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 000727

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/04/2015

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SUBJECT: HONDURAN CARDINAL OSCAR RODRIGUEZ - A WORTHY AND FORMIDABLE CANDIDATE TO SUCCEED JOHN PAUL II

REF: A. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 2912

[1](#)B. 03 TEGUCIGALPA 1534 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)C. 02 VATICAN 4582

Classified By: Political Counselor Francisco L. Palmieri;
Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga is likely to be a formidable force during the conclave to select the next Pope. He is a savvy political player and accomplished media communicator, whose moral compass has repeatedly guided his public policy interventions in Honduras and whose intellect enables him to adroitly deliver tailored messages to varied audiences. He also is a skilled mediator and consensus builder. If selected to be the next Pope, he will present both opportunities and challenges for advancing U.S. foreign policy priorities. Rodriguez has worked collaboratively and repeatedly with AmEmbassy Tegucigalpa to advance shared policy initiatives over the last decade, even when he has opposed other elements of the U.S. agenda, such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Most recently in Honduras, Cardinal Rodriguez led the national effort to combat corruption; questioned whether the proposed CAFTA agreement would distribute equitable benefits to the economically disadvantaged; pressed the Honduran government to use international donor debt forgiveness to make meaningful investments in poverty reduction, and vocally opposed mineral extraction that he believed to be a threat to the environment. END SUMMARY.

A FORMIDABLE FORCE DURING THE CONCLAVE

[1](#)2. (C) Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga is likely to be a formidable force during the conclave to select the next Pope. He is a skilled mediator and consensus builder who communicates effectively to disparate groups. (See ref C for biographic information.) In a telephone call with the Ambassador and in a short meeting with Acting Deputy Chief of Mission/Political Counselor on April 2, he first expressed heart-felt appreciation for President Bush's thoughtful public condolence message on the death of John Paul II and then thanked the Embassy for being the only diplomatic mission to express condolences to him before his departure for Rome. Rodriguez's mood was appropriately mournful over the Pope's death, but also serene about the Catholic Church's upcoming labors of burying "the most important" man of the twentieth-century and selecting a "global" Catholic leader for the twenty-first century. Rodriguez's only direct comment about the selection of the next Pope was to disagree with the notion that the College of Cardinals might choose an older Cardinal to serve as a transitional figure. He said that the conclave would not elect an older Pope because the challenges of the position are too demanding and that the Church needed an active and engaged leader.

[1](#)3. (C) Cardinal Rodriguez confided his travel plans to Rome, during which he twice stated that he would be back in Tegucigalpa by early May and looked forward to meeting with the Ambassador--a genuine, but required, sign of humility. Local Catholic authorities commented over the weekend that they do not expect Rodriguez to return to Honduras, saying that even if not chosen Pope, they believe he will be appointed to a post in the Curia. It was interesting that within hours of the Pope's death Rodriguez indicated during the meeting that he had already been in contact with U.S. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Chilean Cardinal Francisco Errazuriz, Mexican Norberto Rivera and other Brazilian Cardinals. He added that he had not spoken with the Colombian Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, whom some see as a potential conservative Latin American rival. He is close to German Cardinal Karl Lehman, South African Wilfred Napier, and Portugese Jose Seraiva Martins.

[1](#)4. (C) During the last year and a half, Cardinal Rodriguez also traveled extensively outside Honduras - with trips to Europe, including multiple trips to Germany, Asia, Australia, the United States and throughout Latin America. On March 31, the German Ambassador presented Rodriguez with the "Federal

Order of Merit with Great Cross and Golden Plaque" from German President Horst Kohler, a decoration that underscores Rodriguez's long-term ties to Germany and its Catholic Church. Honduran Catholic observers have persistently commented the Cardinal's recent and widespread travel were part of an effort to introduce himself to his new ecclesiastical colleagues and to renew his ties to older friends. He is a savvy political player and accomplished media communicator, whose intellect enables him to adroitly deliver tailored messages to varied audiences. He has, however, made serious missteps on occasion, particularly when he made anti-semitic comments about U.S. media coverage of the sexual abuse scandal.

15. (C) Rodriguez told A/DCM that the most pressing challenges facing the next Pope would include dealing with bioethical questions relating to scientific progress in molecular biology, advancing global peace, particularly in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinians, advocating for more equitable distribution of two key natural resources (oil and water), expanding the Catholic Church's ecumenism, especially with Islam (although he pointedly challenged radical Islam's flawed understanding of holy war.) He also added separately that reform of the Vatican Curia would have to be a top priority, noting that Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano had "grabbed a lot" of power during the past few years.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

16. (C) If selected to be the next Pope, Cardinal Rodriguez will present both opportunities and challenges for advancing U.S. foreign policy priorities. He would be a strong proponent of democracy, supportive of efforts to advance Middle East peace and reach across the breach to speak more effectively to Muslims and Islamic religious leaders, and be likely to pursue President Bush's strong concern about the impediment that corruption represents to economic development in the developing world.

17. (C) Most recently in Honduras, Rodriguez served as the Chairman of the Honduran Anti-corruption Commission, one of only two such commissions in the hemisphere. Initially, the commission brought greater public scrutiny and media coverage to the problem of corruption in Honduras because of the Cardinal's involvement; however, without a defined legal role and limited funding for professional staff, the commission began to fade in importance due to the lack of follow-through on specific corruption allegations. The Cardinal quietly disengaged in the face of efforts by the government of Honduras to co-opt even further the commission's independence. However, last week he returned vigorously to this issue by blasting the lack of progress in Honduras against corruption in his Easter Sunday homily letter. He went further than ever in directly laying the blame on political and economic elites for suborning public officials and stealing from the national treasury. It is quite possible that if chosen Pope, Cardinal Rodriguez might add the full weight of the Church's moral authority to this issue.

18. (C) However, Cardinal Rodriguez would not be shy about criticizing U.S. foreign and economic policies. Rodriguez is deeply suspicious about the inequities caused by what he sees as unregulated capitalism. He is concerned that free trade, while more efficient, could create more economic inequality for the poor, who are least able or prepared to compete in the global economy. For that reason he has been a vocal opponent of CAFTA. He has also been a long-time advocate for international debt forgiveness and pressed the Honduran government to use international donor debt forgiveness to make real meaningful investments in poverty reduction. He also complained privately in the April 2 meeting that the U.S. is not paying enough attention to Latin America and is only really concerned about drug trafficking and illegal migration. Finally, he opposed mineral extraction in Honduras on environmental grounds and has led marches against mining operations, including those by U.S./Canadian companies.

19. (C) That said, he is a strong supporter of a more humane capitalism, and a harsh critic of socialist-inspired systems. In a March 31 address to Honduran business leaders, Rodriguez clearly supported capitalism as a means to liberate people through their creativity, and he endorsed commerce as a necessary response to human needs. He was critical of those who would "seek to hold everyone down to the same level in a quest for social equality", saying that such approaches robbed humans of their creative freedom. He also criticized socialist systems for fostering a "paternalistic state of dependency" in which, "if the front stoop is dirty, the people complain that the State has not come by to sweep it." He closed his short address by calling for a less aggressive, more collaborative form of competition, guided by individuals making decisions based on high personal morals.

110. (C) COMMENT: Cardinal Rodriguez has worked

collaboratively and repeatedly with AmEmbassy Tegucigalpa to advance shared policy initiatives over the last decade, even when he has opposed other elements, such as CAFTA, of the U.S. agenda. As any real and good friend would, he not only appreciates the strengths and positive contributions of the United States to the world, but also is able to talk constructively about his perception of any U.S. shortcomings. His clear voice on moral issues, particularly his support for a culture of life (he has been outspoken in his opposition to abortion and of the local presidential candidates' campaign to institute the death penalty in Honduras), the breadth of his policy interests, and evident spirituality make him a worthy political successor to John Paul II. END COMMENT.
Palmer